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ABSTRACT

New approaches to teaching writing and language development may be the answer to the anomie that is behind so many school problems. For example, the uses of language that are necessary for academic success are also those that help individuals deal with the environment and relate to it. Therefore, the personal use of language is critical for all children, including the disadvantaged. As it is, however, such things as television and broken homes militate against the personal use of language. Under these circumstances, interaction in the home is reduced and alienation and anger occur. Poor language usage is compounded by the traditional methods of language instruction and the promotion of silence in the schools. What is needed to remedy this situation is linguistic compensation which provides frequent language experiences and situations where children can use language to make their experiences and perceptions personally meaningful. A definite strategy for urban English teachers that will, at one time, address the problems of anomie and facilitate basic literacy is needed. In addition, schools need to create the conditions that promote language use in the classroom. (Author/EB)

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Anomie, the Urban Student, and the Writing Class

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We have often described urban youth as alienated from the rest of society. Evidence abounds that many are alienated. Vandalism, violence, against one another and teachers, and, frequently, an overriding sense of apathy characterize the urban classroom. Perhaps these and other problems of the urban school are symptomatic of a condition that has been called anomie. Anomie has been defined by Elwin Powell as the discord in the rhythm of social life; by others as the loss or absence of purpose. Born of anxiety, a feeling of separation, and pointlessness, anomie touches us all: urban and rural, but does the city aggrevate the condition among youth? If anomie is behind many of our school problems, what can schools do about it? Part of the answer may lie in some of the new approaches to teaching writing and language development. If so, we will have found an additional impetus to return to frequent writing in the classroom, not only for reasons of basic literacy but also as a means to alleviate some of the psycho-social conditions that lead to alienation.

In his book The Political Community: A Study of Anomie, Sebastian De Grazia in 1948 identified three major characteristics of anomie. First there is a painful uneasiness or anxiety that is frequently accompanied by a feeling of separation from the group or from group standards. The third feature is a feeling of pointlessness or sense that no particular personal goals exist. Elwin Powell in his Studies in Anomie states that "When communication breaks down, the self cannot validate its existence as a 'me': we label this syndrome dissociation. The self is left without a social role." The first hypothesis is that urban environments contribute to these underlying features of anomie; especially among poor or deprived youth, and who would question that cities are great holding areas for the nation's disadvantaged. Uneasiness or anxiety is heightened by the conditions of

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poverty. To be poor is to be an internal alien. The culture of poverty is radicall different from the one that dominates society and in the city the dominant culture is omnipresent. The media bombard the senses with it. Stores display its wares everywhere, and it is beyond the reach or understanding of the children of poverty. Lifespace is limited to streets, the small commons of the projects, and frequently cramped living quarters. There is no place to escape to. The richness of urban life: museums, libraries, cultural events are not only beyond the financial means of the poor; they are also places where the poor feel unwelcome and out of place. Whereas the city stands as a symbol of hope and achievement for some, it is a visible sign of failure for the poor. "In the city," says R. E. Park, "man gains his freedom but loses his sense of direction....More a population aggregate than a community, the city is functionally integrated through the cash nexus, but there is no communication and no consensus...human relations are symbiotic rather than social

Economic pressures on poor families frequently remove both parents from the home to places of work. In the absence of attendants, children develop a type of separation-anxiety. Separation-anxiety brings on a terror of helplessness that is acute during periods of isolation from the visible sources of support for children. According to De Grazia, each of these incidents or "...crises commences with the deterioration of the child's system of beliefs about the world and terminates with the acquisition of a new or revised set of beliefs." The new beliefs reinforce the child's feeling of isolation, powerlessness, and alienation from the dominant culture. There is no retreat; no safe haven. In the past or in rural settings today there are other attendants as in the extended family; the modern urban child is frequently alone.

The modern urban school is society's best opportunity to provide attendants and to help urban youth find identity and a sense of self worth--if only it worked that way. In the first place, teachers have difficulty relating to and accepting

the cultures of disadvantaged youth. In the words of British educator John Dixon, "Most of us like to feel secure and this is rarely easy for teachers in poor or problem areas. The child's language may be seen carrying with it a threat to the teacher's own values and culture: some may exclude the language of the child's real world because it is unreal to them; others because it is all too real--a failure of imagination on the one hand, of nerve on the other."

In more ways than one, language is the cornerstone of the entire educational process in and out of school. Language may very well be the key to self-actualization The role of language in communication is obvious, but the relationship between language development and intellectual development, and language development and self concept development is only now coming into focus. L.S. Vygotsky as early as 1962 concluded that human mental development has its source in the verbal communication between adult and child. A.R. Luria in 1971 made the point that "...the child's intellectual growth is contingent on his mastering the social means of thought, that is, language." While most American children may be viewed today as linguistically deprived, disadvantaged urban youth suffer the most. From what is known about verbal communication in lower class homes, according to Patrick Creber in his outstanding book Lost For Words, "...it would appear that the cognitive uses of language are severely restricted, especially between adults and children. Language is primarily used to control behavior, to express sentiments and emotions, to permit the vicarious sharing of experiences, and to keep the social machinery of the home running smoothly. These are important uses of language. Many lower class people are more skillful in them than better educated middle class people. But what is lacking by comparison is the use of language to explain, to describe, to instruct, to inquire, to hypothesize, to analyze, to compare, to deduce and to test. And these are the uses that are necessary for academic success." These uses of language are also those that help individuals deal with the environment, relate themselves to it; in a word, cope.

One of, if not the most critical types of learning, is learning from what is experienced. It has been expressed as bringing the past to bear upon the present. In order to facilitate that relationship, however, we have to have experience available to us in a form that enables us to use it. That is the role of language. Through language we shape, interpret, and represent our experiences, and, according to Professor James Britton of the University of London, thereby make our experiences available for further learning. Vygotsky again makes the point that "Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into existence through them." Creber drives the point home when he says, "Through language he (the child) makes the present comprehensible, the past available, the future conceivable."

Language, then, can help alleviate the conditions that lead to anomie. The ability to represent events in our lives in language and examine them analytically gives us a certain power and sense of control. Symbolizing events and perceptions in language we can ease anxiety or prevent it in some cases. In the process of symbolizing through speech and writing we also communicate and this eases the sense of separation from the group. Exploring the world through speech and writing, we make ourselves aware of possible goals and directions for our lives. Finally, speaking and writing are actions, and, to a large degree, human individuals derive their identities from their actions. The personal use of language is critical for all children--for that matter--for all people--if they are to realize their potential for happiness and success.

A variety of things in the modern world militate against this personal use of language. Most notably, television has made us consumers of language and taken much of the opportunity to use language away from us. We cannot interact verbally with our children and watch television at the same time, nor, given the attractiveness of the medium, can we assume that they want to talk to us. Verbal interaction at mealtime is taken away when meals are eaten in front of the television set. If

the average daily viewing time is five hours as some estimate, how many hours has been spent not using language by a sixteen year old? Figure it out sometime. The answer may frighten you. In addition to television, modern lifestyles have broken up families in alarming numbers. One teacher in an inner city school has been keeping a record of the children in her second grade classes who come from broken homes. During the last five years seventy-six percent have come from such homes. This reduces the availibility of adult role models by one-half. Usually, the remaining parent works, and the child is in a day care center during early childhood when language is developing. The opportunity to interact is reduced again. We are not going to change these conditions. We must recognize, however, that they exist, and we must understand what they mean in terms of alienation and anger. Quite simply, a child who lacks the facility for aggressive language will substitute agressive behavior.

The child's prime need and the urban school's first duty is for compensation. This compensation needs to be a linguistic compensation which avoids the meaningless instruction in grammar and usage we now provide and affords, instead, frequent language experiences and situations where children are led to use their language to make their experiences and perceptions personally meaningful. At the present time, schools are doing quite the opposite. Our children are "lost for words." They are tragically silent far too often. Schools promote that silence when they fail to recognize the culture shock coming to school represents for children and disadvantaged children especially. "Any child may be expected to suffer from social exposure when he starts to school...the lot of the severely deprived child is far worse; he may be said to come to school wearing the wrong mind," Creber asserts. Yes! Wearing the wrong mind, the wrong culture, and the wrong language! John Dixon expresses it well when he says, "A child coming to school for the first time may find many doors before which he can only stand stock still and speechless. The situation is beyond him, we say. At times, all children are at a social

disadvantage, and when they go beyond the limits of their social experience, language fails them." When language fails them, the conditions that lead to anomie are exacerbated by that failure and the resultant sense of impotence. They react the only way they can: they reject school, society, and the values of both. The other alternative is to reject themselves. Many do reject themselves at first, but if they are going to survive at all they have to reject school and society.

The urban school must create climates that generate what Carl Rogers has called psychological safety and psychological freedom and schools can do that through an informed utilization of language. Rogers offers three processes by which psychological safety and psychological freedom are fostered. First the child must be accepted as of unconditional worth. Second, there must be a climate where external evaluation is absent. Evaluation is always a threat. It creates a need for defensiveness. Finally, Rogers says that we must understand emphatically the concept of psychological freedom. We must realize ". . . that when a teacher, parent, therapist, other facilitating person permits the individual complete freedom of symbolic expression, creativity is fostered. This permissiveness gives the individual complete freedom to think, to feel, to be whatever is most inward within himself. It fosters the openness, and the playful and spontaneous juggling of precepts, concepts, and meanings which is a part of creativity."

What all this suggests is a definite strategy for urban English teachers that will, at one time, address the problems of anomie and facilitate basic literacy. The strategy is not a new one. The National Council of Teachers of English several years ago passed a resolution affirming a student's right to his or her own language. Accepting that resolution would go a long way toward creating the psychological freedom and safety that would make children less silent; would help them become risk takers in the sense that they would feel psychologically secure from censure when they do use their language to explore and to symbolize. Once we accept that children have a right to their own language, we could do any number of things to promote meaningful language activity. There is no shortage

of good ideas. The literature of the profession abounds with successful practices. Peter Elbow in his book Writing Without Teachers outlines a teaching strategy based on freewriting and group writing. Both facilitate symbolizing, reflection on internal concerns, and all those other uses of language that lead to academic success and the amelioration of anomie. Kenneth Macrorie in his book Uptaught and in numerous other publications gives many examples where speech and writing in one's own language about matters of personal concern lead to exceptional language growth and the discovery of personal worth and dignity. Terry Radcliff and Robert Zoellner have for ten years expounded upon the positive effects of what they call talk-write, a process where discussion and stream-of-consciousness writing facilitates problem solving and concept formation. Outstanding teachers at all levels like Mina Shaugnessy and Sister Agnes Pastva have tried such approaches and documented their successes. We can teach Johnny to write and in doing so we can help him find his dignity.

We can do these things, but we have not done them on any scale that makes a significant difference; it is more than the normal lag between theory and practice that stands in the way. We have a cultural predisposition that favors silent classrooms, and classrooms where children diligently engage in dummy workbook exercises that are meaningless and futile. Both silence and workbook drill present the proper image of academic rigor. In effect, they are professional malpractice. There is clearly a need for more talk in our classrooms: more student talk that is. This talk should naturally lead to freewriting and group writing where language is stretched to deal with the growing edges of personal meaning. Freewriting and group writing in turn should lead to successive stages of refinement in writing as confidence grows, concepts mature, and language develops. It is a model based on natural processes of language acquisition; actually, an extension of them. It is a model that eliminates study of standards of usage and correctness at the beginning of the developmental process and places them nearer

the end of that process where they belong.

Schools need to create the conditions that promote language use in the classroom. Schools must have smaller classes or increase the number of adults in the large classes they now have. The opportunity and pressure to interact within a group is in direct proportion to the size of the group. Five-to-one is an ideal ratio. The criteria for teaching success must include those that relate to how well a teacher promotes speech and writing. For example, such criteria might include the ability to ask probing questions, to listen to children, to avoid being the chief speaker in class discussion, the ability and willingness to accept the child's own language or dialect, and so forth. Schools must learn to resist public over-reaction on the back-to-basics issue. The mania to go back to what is popularly called the basics has silenced more children than anything in recent memory. Back-to-basics has meant back to rote memorization, drill, workbook exercises, and silent, passive children. John Coe describes how it used to be and what we are going to see more of in the years ahead:

> Immobile in their desks, armed only with pens, pencils and paper, busy for so many hours filling in someone else's blanks. Do you remember? The children used to have Busy Books. It passed the time away.
>
> The best children of course were those who were quiet. 'Wonderful class that 3A,' we would say. 'They don't make a sound.' The talk, so fundamental to all language development, had to go on surreptitiously in the corridor before the lesson began, out of the side of the mouth during Morning Assembly, in the lines formed with military precision before leading in from the playground. Retribution followed discovery, 'talking' was reason for punishment.*

Our modern children are not just short on facts that raise test scores, and they are not just short on words; our children are virtually devoid of the social and language environment where words are used to make personal meaning of the

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*Coe's comments were made in a briefing paper at the Walsall Seminar and is quoted in Patrick Creber's Lost For Words.

daily events of living. Meaninglessness in school and forced involvement in meaningless activity adds to feelings of powerlessness, impotence, and alienation from self and society that we call anomie. We can begin to compensate when we begin to listen to children and to help them use their language to explore themselves and their worlds.

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